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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001841

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [TU](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: THE TURKS AND HISTORY: THRASHING ABOUT ON THE
"ARMENIAN GENOCIDE"

REF: 04 ANKARA 7106

(U) Classified by DCM Robert Deutsch, E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Although the Turkish public debate on the fate of the Armenians in Anatolia is slowly opening up, a defensive Turkish nationalist policy of denial remains the position of choice for both the Kemalist and more Islamist/neo-Ottoman-oriented sides of the establishment. Launching an uncompromising public relations offensive, main opposition leader Baykal and PM Erdogan are calling for a commission of Turkish and Armenian scholars to conduct a "scientific" investigation which will "prove" there was no genocide. The Turks plan to ask the UK Parliament to denounce the 1916 "Blue Book" on Ottoman treatment of Armenians, a move the UK Embassy here thinks is a mistake. This latest denial campaign looks certain to antagonize the EU; it will do nothing for Turkey's reputation. End summary.

2. (U) On the question of the mass killings and forced deportations of Armenians from Anatolia, the Turkish establishment -- both the "secularist" Kemalist side and the more Islamist/neo-Ottoman side -- is determined to cling to denial as history.

Parliamentary Initiative to Find "The Truth"

3. (U) In a March 24 address to Parliament, main opposition CHP leader Baykal called for formation of a joint commission of Turkish and Armenian scholars to research the events of 1915. Baykal also called for the commission to include a neutral party such as UNESCO to act as an arbiter. PM Erdogan has supported this initiative.

4. (U) The Turkish idea is that "scientific, historical" research will prove genocide claims false. Its purpose, according to Baykal, is "to show the world they (Armenians) are lying and there was no genocide." In this assertion, Baykal banks on the assumption that neither the Turkish Parliament nor the public is prepared for any other result.

Turks Blame Armenians for Ending Last Joint Research

5. (C) According to Turkish Historical Society President Yusuf Halacoglu, there is currently no other ongoing joint history initiative. The last such project ended because, according to Halacoglu, Armenian scholars refused to meet in Vienna in May 2005 unless the Turkish side first admitted genocide. Halacoglu's own standards of historiography are reflected in his assertion that there could not have been mass killings of Armenians since there would have been mass graves if such killings had taken place, and no one has found such mass graves.

6. (U) Halacoglu and State Archives Director Yusuf Sarinay claim all Turkish historical archives are open. There are three caveats: intending researchers must speak Ottoman Turkish; they must have a visa allowing them to perform research; they can only study documents that have been "catalogued." As of last May 2004, 80 million of 150 million documents had been catalogued. Critics charge that incriminating documents are purged in the cataloging process.

Offensive Kicks Off with McCarthy Lectures

7. (U) The Baykal-inspired public relations campaign kicked off with lectures by visiting U.S. history professor Justin McCarthy on March 23 at Bilkent University and March 24 in Parliament. McCarthy used both lectures to focus on the historical context of the events of 1915. McCarthy's main points were that those who charge genocide overlook Armenian revolutionary activity and Moslem deaths during the same period. Strikingly, while focusing on events leading up to deportations and massacres, McCarthy barely mentioned the deportations and massacres themselves.

8. (U) McCarthy's speech to Parliament, featuring strong anti-EU undercurrents, was warmly received by a packed Parliamentary audience that included Baykal, FonMin Gul, AK

Parliament Speaker Arinc, and several AKP ministers. McCarthy drew particularly strong applause when, refuting missionary sources for genocide claims, he used the present tense to declare that "missionaries lie quite often". It is not clear, however, that the Turks will want to continue to use McCarthy as a spokesman: in his March 29 column in "Hurriyet", doyen of Turkish opinion writers (and an arch leftist-nationalist) Oktay Eksi disparaged the idea that Turkey should rely on a foreigner like McCarthy to make its case.

Attack on UK "Blue Book"

19. (U) Again at Baykal's instigation, the GOT is contemplating sending a letter from PM Erdogan to the UK Parliament demanding that the UK Parliament denounce as propaganda the 1916 British "Blue Book" on the treatment of Armenians in Turkey from 1915-1916. The "Blue Book" uses eyewitness accounts to make the case for a centrally-planned genocide.

10. (C) In early March, Baykal reportedly prepared a draft letter for Erdogan's signature. According to UK Embassy PolChief Miller, the UK has not yet received the letter. Miller views the Turkish public relations campaign as "clumsy." She thinks the letter idea is a mistake. She told us the UK Parliament is one of the few in Europe that has not addressed the Armenian genocide issue; she doubts it is to the Turks' advantage for them to do so.

Signs of A More Open Approach

11. (U) Like their Ottoman antecedents, those who have run the Republic of Turkey have never permitted a free, open and enlightened discussion of any aspect of history. Yet the Turkish establishment's control of history is no longer so firm as it once was. In this context a fuller and more mature discussion of how the Armenian presence in Anatolia was wiped out has slowly emerged from below:

--Fethiye Cetin's "My Grandmother" ("Anneannem"), published in November 2004 to favorable reviews, tells how, late in life, her grandmother revealed that she had been an Armenian child caught up at the age of nine in the mass killings of 1915, taken in forcibly by a Turkish family, and converted by them to Islam. Ms. Cetin's book is likely to create more space for the many Turks with such a hidden family story (ref) to come forward. We witnessed an example of this evolution in a March 23 discussion with three Turks we have known for some time. Asked what we thought of the Armenian issue, we drew their attention to the book. Two of the three then acknowledged they had at least one Armenian antecedent; we expect the third -- from an area of Sivas which had a substantial Armenian population until 1915 -- will eventually do so as well.

--"Armenians in Turkey 100 Years Ago," published in early 2005 to accompany an Istanbul exhibition of postcards of Armenian scenes in Anatolia from the turn of the 20th century, lists 1,309 Armenian churches in its index of the scenes from the postcards, a subtle partial accounting of what has disappeared (one columnist who has taken a leading role in trying to deny the claims of genocide, admitted to us privately that there were 6,000 Armenian churches in the boundaries of the late Ottoman empire).

--"Yeni Safak" ombudsman Kursat Bumin, "Radikal" managing editor Ismet Berkan and columnist Haluk Sahin, and Ankara University poli sci professor Baskin Oran have written columns since late 2004 to try to edge the debate forward on the Armenian tragedy of 1915.

--Novelist Orhan Pamuk, to the vengeful resentment of left- and right-wing nationalists and the disparagement of Turkey's professional intellectuals that he is angling for a Nobel Prize, opined recently in an interview with a Swiss publication that one million Armenians were killed.

--AK MP Ali Riza Alaboyun (who did his PhD at Penn State) has invited two prominent Armenian Turks to testify to the Parliament's EU Harmonization Committee in April.

--On March 7, "Milliyet" newspaper published Sabanci University Professor Halil Berktaay's frank discussion of the Ottoman government's behavior toward the Armenians in 1915. Among other things, Berktaay called the deportation order a crime against humanity, said the order contained many elements of genocide, and argued the order was a signal that the local population was "free to hunt" Armenians. Berktaay called claims that Armenians killed 500,000 Turks "exaggerated."

12. (C) Comment: Given Turkey's current apprehension over what EU harmonization entails, general and deep lack of

self-confidence among Turks, and resultant edgy upswing in nationalism, the campaign to exonerate Turkey is currently louder and more dominant than the voices of a more open approach. This Baykal-generated, defensive and uncompromising gambit is likely to do no more than add to the degeneration of the official domestic historical "debate" here. It will certainly have no persuasive effect on general world opinion and is highly likely further to estrange opinion in the EU toward Turkey. Yet as Baskin Oran remarked to us March 30, the last great taboo of the Republic of Turkey has been broken, and, after Turkey thrashes its way through a new, messy, and unproductive period of unpersuasive denial, the debate here will head toward a more enlightened, conciliatory resolution. End Comment.

EDELMAN